Chapter 13
The DEI Industrial Complex:
Undermining Black Woman Leadership

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ABSTRACT

The DEI initiative is a multi-year project to support campuses in shifting power to create an anti-racist and equity-based space through liberatory practices, grassroots organizing, and equity-centered education. In this paper, the authors reflect on their communal work to disrupt injustice through an intersectional framework. To frame this paper, the authors first outline the historical and present impact of DEI work within academia, highlighting anti-blackness and misogynoir. Next, the authors introduce the term DEI industrial complex and provide an overview of the framework. After providing this analytic framework, the authors further explore how incidents of undermining Black leadership manifest within the academy. Asserting agency over the DEI complex, the concluding section offers essential survival tools.

"I am, because we are" – The African Philosophy of Ubuntu

The work of transforming the state of racism and anti-Blackness does not happen in isolation but stands on the shoulders of foreparents in the work. The authors dedicate this writing to their mothers – Anita Torrence, Lucila Petrona Hines de Blackman, and Dorothy Louise McNeil Rodgers (1948-1986), who

limitlessly sacrificed, nurtured and prepared them for this work. This entry is also dedicated to DEI foremothers and pioneers upon whose shoulders we stand and contemporary comrades engaged in the daily fight for survival.

As Diversity Equity Inclusion (DEI) work continues to gain widespread funding within the academy, many Black and Indigenous DEI practitioners continue to see and experience the deep scars of racial harm within spaces of higher learning. Despite the proliferation of DEI initiatives post-summer 2020 uprisings, between writing drafts of this work, the authors faced new and daily additions of macroaggressions and racial undermining. Because there is deep love and dedication to the student-scholars, faculty, and staff the authors serve, the purpose of this writing aims to give voice to the perpetual dynamics and continued racialized harm faced within the era of DEI in higher education. In pushing back on the ways anti-Blackness in the traditional cannon can restrict Black voice, the authors chose to frame this work in ways that center their experience as Black changemakers. By employing essential tools, the practitioners can create new alternatives to address anti-Blackness in the academy at the root rather than the leaves.

INTRODUCTION

"Sometimes people try to destroy you, precisely because they recognize your power - not because they don't see it, but because they see it and they don't want it to exist." – Bell Hooks 1994a, p. 59.

Almost three decades later, hooks' quote resounds loudly for systemic oppression of Black practitioners engaging in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) work. DEI is the umbrella term used to describe work that forwards self and community actualization for all beings while creating interventions to shift the historical and present ways some groups have been unfairly marginalized. Since the racial justice protests of 2020, the demand for DEI practitioners, trainers, and administrators —who are often Black women or people of color —has taken off. However, as Black, lesbian, warrior mother poet Audre Lorde reminds us, the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. Logan (2021) has shown that most of the DEI undertakings have offered the illusion of power to minoritized people and their comrades without providing the power needed to shift the structural systems. This dynamic leaves Black and minoritized people with little recourse against incessantly harmful environments, despite rhetoric claiming otherwise.

The objective of DEI work is to push the academy to redress oppressive harmful structures. However, it is unlikely that efforts funded by and accountable to an institution built on White, elitist, patriarchy, and ableist supremacy will be enough to overhaul inequities Black people and other minoritized groups confront. Claims of performative allyship that stand in solidarity against injustices often leave those who are both Black and women in double jeopardy and isolation (Beal, 2008). Performative allies observe harm but remain silent or identify as supporters and fail to use their voices in shared governance spaces and meetings to advocate radically against injustices experienced by all community members. Their actions, in turn, help sustain harm perpetrated against Black women and non-binary persons.

As DEI practitioners – a director of a multicultural center and co-director/co-founder of a university-wide DEI initiative, a director of a Percy Ellis Sutton SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) program, and the social work department chair-elect, founding director and program chief administrator of a Master of Social Work (MSW) program – the authors attempt to reconcile truths through a multi-prong approach. First, they provide a brief historical overview of DEI. Next, they outline its evolution into what they coin "the DEI Industrial Complex" historical overview (see the appendix for

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